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# Tales of critical moments in professional football

Tom Mitchell, Mark Nesti, Dave Richardson & Martin Littlewood



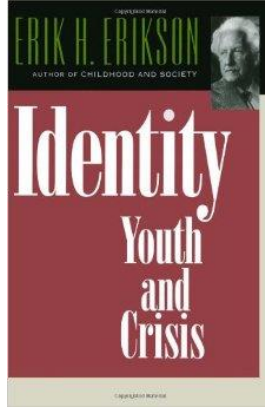
# Introduction

- The term ‘critical moments’ describes the range of experiences of professional footballers, and are defined as;
- *“Frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the anxiety associated with an important change in our identity”*  
(Nesti et al. 2012, p. 23).

# Knowledge of critical moments

- Positive situations may typically include; gaining a professional contract, winning a cup competition, playing consistently well.
- Negative situations include deselection and subsequent exit from the football club], injury, non-selection for matches, family and relationship difficulties (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011, Nesti et al, 2013, Nesti, 2013).

# Identity



- Erikson's (1968) 8 Stages of psychosocial development.
- Identity develops through a combination of biological maturity, societal expectation, and experience of life so far and relationships made.
- There have been calls for the work of Erikson to be used as a theoretical lens in the sport psychology literature; N. American student athletes (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001), Transition (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), Mental Toughness (Crust, 2008).

# Identity in Football

- A strong, flexible, clear sense of identity may be most suitable for players to meet their potential (Balague, 1999, Nesti & Littlewood, 2011).
- English professional football has been described as; domineering, authoritarian, uncertain and often volatile (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006; Nesti, et al 2012).

# Knowledge of critical moments

- Our understanding of such critical moments in professional and youth football is limited (Parker, 2001; Roderick, 2006, 2006a, Nesti et al., 2012).
- To contribute to this emerging body of knowledge the aim of this study is to present accounts of lived experience and transition in professional football.

# Sprotbrough United

- Case carried out for their sake as they are of sufficient interest to readers to take some intrinsic value (Stake, 2004).
- Season-long ethnographic engagement at a then Championship football Club with a Cat 2 academy.
- 1 day a week over a season, participant observer
- 2 Players, Kevin and Brett



# Data Collection and Goodness

- Interviews
- Field notes
- Reflexive diary
- Being around
- Prolonged engagement
- Regular meetings with supervisory team
- Member checking
- Triangulation

(Holt & Sparkes, 2001; Parker, 2001; Wagstaff, Fletcher & Hanton, 2011)

(Hammersly & Atkinson, 2007; Sparkes, 1998; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013)

# Data Representation

- Creative non-fiction (CNF)
- Valuable and necessary mode of expression (Sparkes & Smith, 2014)
- Stories are a form of analysis and are seen to encourage reflection and stir imagination (Smith, 2013)
- Reflective tool in coach development (Careless & Douglas, 2008), Spinal cord injury (Smith, 2013)
- The aim is to show rather than tell.

# Kevin (Lost in the system)

Kevin, 19.

EDS player.



He is a right full back and in his first season with a professional contract and has been at Sprotbrough from the age of nine.

# Brett (Uncertainty)

- Brett, 18,
- Second year academy player
- Centre Midfielder, he was at a rival club from the age of nine to 16, then moved to Sprotbrough.



# Reflection's

- Uncertainty and insecurity is a key facet of transition (Roderick, 2006, 2006a; Nesti; 2013). Mainly due to a lack of feedback.
- Players sense of Identity, is severely challenged in transition and a range of other critical moments.
- Staff appear to have little understanding of how to manage such situations.
- Sub-optimal and only informal support is in place to manage players in transition.

# Research directions?

- Practitioner – researcher reflections are essential.
- More player case studies.
- CNF / stories / tales are a viable way of representing player and practitioners realities.
- Exploration of support mechanisms in place to ‘catch’ players in crisis.

# Other critical moments and common themes

Fights between players who are rivals for a playing position

Non selection when fit + lack of feedback

Deselection + exit + lack of feedback

Receiving a professional contract

New Manager, new position – 6 months before decision time

New Manager, frozen out the team and trained with other squads

- Further support of the *uncertain* and *insecure* nature of a footballing career but now seen at several levels of the game.
- Footballers live in *hope* and use it as a tool for coping.
- Use their sense of self to draw upon their values and authenticity – if they knew themselves.

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## **April**

**Kevin:** *I can't say I've had any highs this season, to be honest. It's been a disappointing season. All I have got to hope is that they offer me another contract... We've not been told, well rumour is that we're not going to be told until end of the season when they know what league they are going to be in, whether it's championship or league one. So it could be a bit of a wait. I'd be gutted to be honest because you'd like to know as soon as possible, if they tell you now you know where you stand, you can go find another club. But you just have got to get on with it haven't you, there's nothing that my agent can do to persuade them [the coaches] otherwise; it's a waiting game.*

## **May**

**My experiences:** *I make another visit to the training ground to see Kevin. As I enter the staff offices you can tell there is level of tension around the place, silent offices, the usual 'alright mate' but that's it. The first team are perilously close the relegation zone which affects the whole environment, even at academy level. I walk into Pete's office and he's sat next to Kevin looking intensely at a lap top. 'Hi guys' I say, they both look up and acknowledge me but are straight back down to the lap top. They are working on a DVD of footage for Kevin to send to clubs and agents. He's been released from the club. During our interview it transpires that he was told whilst he was injured! How ruthless can you get? It's great that the lower level coaches and sport scientists are willing to support payers but on the whole It seems that there is little empathy nor understanding of the impact such a decision can have on a player, it seems very much business like with no time for sentiment, not even with a player that has been with the club his entire 'career'.*

*I enter the training ground and go to the staff offices as normal. Pete takes me out of the office, down a stairwell that looks like it's used by fans on a match day, through some double doors into a corridor. I can hear some rap music coming from the gym area. I wait outside but Pete barges in. "Brett! Tom's here to see you go and have a talk to him". This is met with a less than favourable response of; "Fuck sake do I av to?" Brett seems really unhappy to be interviewed this time but of course he begrudgingly agrees to continue to show willingness and enthusiasm for anything staff ask of him. Pete shows me to the kitchen area next to the gym. Walking past the gym door I see Paul [assistant sport scientist] and around 9 or 10 scholars doing a gym based circuit session. It looks like some of the elite development squad are in as well. Paul waves, smiles and shouts 'Big fuckin day today mate'. 'Oh right' I respond with a smile, although I have no idea what he is talking about. I went in to the kitchen area, closed the door, still hearing the dull bass coming from the gym music station. Brett is slumped in a chair opposite me, he has his head down, his knees are shaking. It was like he was waiting to walk the plank. It starts to become clear what this big day is. It is the day that players are told if they are to receive a professional playing contract. Where is the sport psychologist? Where are the professional support bodies?*

*Brett's body language oozes stress, tension, anxiety and dread. This is the day that Brett, as well as his family, friends and significant others have been waiting for, this is his defining moment which may reinforce or shatter his identity. He is currently a footballer, but in around 20 minutes time he may not be. My first thought is to immediately end the interview but then, no, let's try and capture this. I can't imagine a more stressful time in my whole professional life, let alone try and imagine what he's going through. We talk a little bit about how he is feeling and what he might do if he wasn't offered a contract, but Brett is clearly uncomfortable with talking to me due to the impending meeting with the academy manager. We ended We left the kitchen area, Brett went back into the gym to wait to be called into the academy manager's office. I really hope Ryan gets something here....or should I say what if he doesn't?*